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ARTICLE ENTITLED “WOULD ZION
WILLIAMSON RETURN TO DUKE,
HIS STEPFATHER SAYS NO,
QUIETING THE SPECULATION”**

Would Zion Williamson return to Duke? His stepfather says no, quieting the speculation.

By Des Bieler and

Cindy Boren

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The stepfather of Zion Williamson, the presumed No. 1 pick in the NBA draft next month, shot down speculation that the Duke star is unhappy with the possibility of playing for the New Orleans Pelicans and toying with the idea of returning to school for another season.

Granted, it was a stunner when the Pelicans cashed in a 6 percent chance and leaped past six teams with better odds to claim the top pick in the draft lottery Tuesday night. Speculation soon turned to the possibility that Williamson might balk at beginning his NBA career in New Orleans. Although Williamson and his family have time to consider all the options, his stepfather seemed certain he'd start his NBA career soon.

Returning for a second season with Mike Krzyzewski's Blue Devils "is not [something] that we have even considered," Lee Anderson, the stepfather, said on the "Off the Bench" radio show in Baton Rouge.

According to Anderson, Williamson and his family accept how the lottery turned out.

"One thing that Zion has always been taught is that you accept the things that you can't change. You change the things that you can change," Anderson said. "This is one of the things that he had nothing to do with. It's the process of the NBA, and certainly we're excited about the Crescent City down there in New Orleans."

Williamson has yet to sign with an agent or a shoe company, which helped fuel the speculation that he could return to Duke. But his stepfather said that arises more from the desire to make the right choices, given that Williamson is only 18.

"We just feel that there's no real rush to do this right now," Anderson said. "You don't get many opportunities in life to have the leverage and to have the opportunity to control your own narrative. Therefore, we feel like we are in position now to do that. We just want to make sure that when we do whatever it is that we do, it's the right decision. We don't want to look back and have regrets about it. We just want to make sure that we do it right."

Anderson said that the family is close and doesn't listen to all the outside noise, whether it's about Williamson playing after injuring his knee last spring, returning to Duke or other matters. "I spoke with — who's that coach? — [Alvin] Gentry. We met with David Griffin [the Pelicans' executive vice president of basketball

operations] and had a great conversation and are excited at the prospect of coming down there and getting settled and looking for a place to stay and all these good things."

That aligns with a report from The Athletic's Shams Charania, who tweeted that Williamson had a positive meeting with the Pelicans before the lottery.

Anderson's comments came a day after Brian Windhorst pointed out on ESPN's "The Jump" that not hiring an agent or signing a shoe deal keeps Williamson's college eligibility intact, as long as he pulls his name out of draft consideration by June 10, the early entrant withdrawal deadline that comes 10 days before the draft itself. Of course, it also helps drive up the price on that shoe deal.

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Windhorst said that the topic of Williamson's potential unhappiness with going to the Pelicans — particularly after seeing the New York Knicks and Los Angeles Lakers come agonizingly close to getting the first pick — has been "blowing up my phone since last night." After suggesting that Williamson "could threaten to go back to Duke," Windhorst said, "Now, is that the kind of person that Zion is? People that I know who know him say no, that this is not who he is." Windhorst then added that "it's a conversation that's happening in the NBA right now."

That conversation may have been fueled by a tweet Tuesday from ESPN's Marc J. Spears just after New Orleans won the lottery. Citing a source who claimed that Williamson "was rooting to go to New York," Spears tweeted that the AP Player of the Year in college basketball "was QUICKLY whisked out of the room after Pelicans were announced the winner of the draft lottery."

Footage hit the Internet of Williamson's instant reaction to the lottery results, and his wide-eyed, grinning reaction allowed for a variety of interpretations. Was that a smile on his face, or more of a grimace?

The host of "The Jump," Rachel Nichols, also anchored ESPN's live coverage of the lottery results and said Tuesday night that when Williamson learned that the Pelicans got the No. 1 pick, he "kind of looked like he had been hit by a truck." She claimed that "when he woke up this morning, New Orleans was not what he was thinking," but added that "once he resets his mind-set," Williamson would take a more optimistic view of things.

Here's Zion's reaction to the Pelicans getting the No. 1 pick 

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On "The Jump," panelist Richard Jefferson brought up Steve Francis, the Maryland star who waited until he was drafted second overall in 1999 by the Grizzlies before making it clear that he had no desire to play for that team, then located in Vancouver. The Grizzlies went on to trade him to the Houston Rockets before his rookie season began.

Dominique Wilkins pulled a similar move in 1982 after being drafted third overall by the Utah Jazz, and ended up getting dealt to the Atlanta Hawks. For Williamson, as the presumptive No. 1 pick, to let the Pelicans know before the draft that he wanted no part of them would be more unusual, but it has some precedent in other sports.

The NFL saw a pair of highly touted quarterbacks, John Elway in 1983 and Eli Manning in 2004, make clear their aversions to the teams with the No. 1 picks. In both cases, though, they were still drafted by those teams before being quickly traded.

In 1991, the NHL's Eric Lindros was also drafted No. 1 by a team he warned away, the Quebec Nordiques, who initially refused to trade him. He spent a season playing with his junior hockey club and with Canada's national team in the 1992 Olympics before eventually getting shipped to the Philadelphia Flyers.

Returning to Duke would a very bold move that would cost him millions in the short term. As it was, he escaped a major scare during his one season with the Blue Devils, when a knee injury he suffered when he slipped on the court after his shoe exploded turned out to be much less severe than initially feared.

Some thought Williamson should have heeded the warning that injury represented and never again played for Duke, but he said he was eager to rejoin his teammates for an NCAA tournament run. Two of his closest teammates, fellow freshman stars RJ Barrett and Cam Reddish, are also set to go pro, so they wouldn't be around if Williamson returned.

For that and other reasons, it appears highly unlikely that Williamson would actually go back to Duke. Yet as the New York Times' Marc Stein noted Wednesday, leaving open the option to do so could give him leverage with the Pelicans, who are already engaged in a staredown of sorts with disgruntled all-star Anthony Davis. They reportedly hope he might be convinced to rescind his trade demand because of the tantalizing prospect of playing alongside Williamson.

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